The Transnational Turn and the Dilemma of the "phenomenal mix"

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The timing was perfect: When the organizers of the panel "Framing American History" for the conference in honor of Tom Bender suggested we consider the question "How does the 'transnational turn' shape how we teach US history?" I was at that moment working to "transnationalize" a US-focused course I had been teaching for several years. I had long since become accustomed to being inspired, delighted, and challenged by just about anything Tom Bender ever wrote, and his many and eloquent writings on the importance of transcending the boundaries of the nation-state and understanding national history "as itself being made in and by histories that are both larger and smaller than the nation's" seemed impossible to ignore.[1] And yet—I had been doing just that. As intellectually compelling as Tom's argument was, I, like many others on our panel, am not based in a university history department. I do not teach concentrators or graduate students, and the practical imperatives of bringing a more global perspective to my own particular course offering seemed mainly to emphasize the gap between the way historians engage with history and the way most other people see it. On the assumption that many of my fellow historians face similar challenges—and pleasures—vis-à-vis their curricula, I want to describe mine.

Indeed there have been plenty of pleasures; having wandered from public television documentary to political speechwriting to a doomed but ambitious network television history series, I have very much enjoyed a career spent mainly in the company of that category of "most other people." Even now at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism I do some teaching in the master's-level professional program and direct the Communications PhD program, a gleefully capacious interdisciplinary endeavor in which students pursue individual courses of study that cross traditional departmental boundaries to embrace everything from political science to computer science to comparative literature to law—and, sometimes, history. Within the profession, too, I stand a little to the side: My main scholarly interest is the history

of journalism, a field that to this day struggles to surmount its historic and not entirely undeserved reputation as terminally Whiggish, in thrall to the professional schools that watch over it, and of no possible interest to anybody else.[2] I will be forever grateful that Tom was one of the rare scholars who *did* find the history of journalism interesting back in the days when studying it meant spending endless days with your head stuck in the microfilm reader. Understanding journalism history is in fact *essential* to understanding the history of what Tom in his legendary article on synthesis would call "the making of public culture": "Wholes and Parts" explores the changing ways that societies and communities share and contest the stories about themselves that they recognize as significant and are willing to accept as true to life.[3] But without Tom's encouragement and understanding I would never have had the nerve or the strength to keep putting my head back into that awful machine.

The course I was working to revise is for students in the jam-packed ten-month professional Master of Science degree program that is the main business of Columbia's journalism school. In 2009, we scrapped the hoary two-course requirement covering professional traditions, ethics, and standards and replaced it with a required sequence of four seven-week mini-courses that address the business, the ethics, the law, and the history of journalism. I was the main architect of the history offering, and I have been teaching several sections a year ever since.

In the beginning I kept the focus tightly American. I made that decision in part because that is what I know best, but I also believed that so brief a course would flounder and flail if I did not focus *somewhere*.

And an American focus made some sense both interpretively and pragmatically. Most of the students who come to Columbia aspire to be the particular kind of journalist known as the reporter—the person who uses specialized techniques of observation and investigation to gather, organize, and present facts—and for decades after they first appeared in the 1830s, reporters were seen as an essentially American phenomenon, both a product and an enabler of the aggressive entrepreneurship of the US-style mass press. In fact American reporters were widely reviled by the traditionally more elite and literary-minded European press as intrusive, barbaric, crude, and a blight on humanity, but American-style journalism, both in its better manifestations (investigative exposure) and its worse (tabloids), eventually came to exert an enormous influence on the evolution of the press elsewhere.

Soon, however, my close American focus began to feel less and less defensible. Part of the reason was simple demographics: In the past decade the student body in the master's programs has evolved from about fifteen percent international to around one-third—in itself a living argument for the global stature of journalism—and the students' grumbling was audible.

But it was also becoming ever clearer to me that for all the reasons that Tom has been arguing so eloquently, it was intellectually untenable to try to understand an institution whose fundamental purpose is to influence the world without looking how

it has functioned in the world and around the world. So after several years of incremental revision, I devoted a summer to a comprehensive overhaul.

It wasn't easy.

Some of the challenges were logistical. As a required class worth only one credit, it is vulnerable to an "eat your pretty unimportant spinach" air, especially for aspiring journalists, who tend to care a lot more about seconds and minutes than decades and centuries. To grab and hold their attention has always taken some applied classroom acrobatics along with brisk lectures, engaging slideshows, and multiple opportunities (and requirements) for the students to speak up.

Since we are a professional degree program, moreover, we do not require any specific academic preparation and have accepted people with undergraduate majors in everything from engineering to dance. The students are worldly, articulate, and smart, and more than a few have come to journalism from successful careers in other fields. But since in any given class only a handful of them have deeply studied the history of any era or region, whether their own or another, I make no assumptions concerning common knowledge about the past, and take time to identify or define even such topics as women's suffrage, colonialism, Hiroshima, and Richard Nixon.

Choosing a representative array of course materials that embody a global perspective poses other challenges. From the beginning I had decided that asking young reporters to focus on primary documents—to closely read, view, or listen to actual pieces of journalistic work—would be much more interesting and fruitful than giving them readings in secondary sources. In journalism, however, language counts a great deal, and globalized or not, this course had to be conducted in English, the classroom's only common language . Even in English or in good translations, moreover, journalistic work by the non-white, the non-Western, or the non-male has often been marginalized or lost, making it difficult to find accessible examples that I can make comprehensible to students who may lack an understanding of the historical context.

Finally, of course, I want the course to be *good*. I love teaching the class, which may well be the only systematic postsecondary exposure to history that many of my students will ever have, and I want to make the most of the opportunity, to give them something that is thematically coherent, interpretively provocative, and contextually rich. Something that sends them away grappling with at least one or two ideas they have not had before. Something, perhaps, that invites them to think about *the making of public culture*. All in a course with a running time shorter than that of the World Series.

That has led to what has turned out to be my biggest challenge in transnationalizing a course for people whose approach to the discourse of history ranges from intrigued to utilitarian to leery to, occasionally, panicky. Mindful of my meager allotment of seven weekly sessions, I knew I could not simply pack in a bunch of international pieces without spinning the course into a perfunctory and possibly incoherent sprawl. Instead I sought material that enriched, expanded on, or complicated themes and ideas that we were already exploring. Mahatma Gandhi's publication

Harijan, for instance, which he described on September 24, 1938 as "not a newspaper [but] a views paper representing those of one man," sparked a lively debate about the differences between journalism, advocacy, information, and propaganda. The excerpt from "The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor" by the young reporter Gabriel García Márquez that I added to our week exploring the complex relationships between New Journalism and literal truth was both intriguing and unsettling to students who had known him only as a novelist of magical realism. The Freedom Rides in Australia to protest discrimination against Aboriginal people led to scenes of brutality and chaos just as the earlier ones in Anniston and Birmingham had, but while the extensive media coverage in the US helped shape public opinion against the segregationists, Darce Cassidy's radio reports from New South Wales were suppressed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as too inflammatory. And the article on Russian human rights abuses in Chechnya written by Anna Politkovskaya, who was later shot dead by hired guns whose master has never been publicly identified, brought home the reality that investigative journalism doesn't always end in Pulitzers, plaudits, and a star playing *you* in a blockbuster movie.[4]

But while I have no doubt that recasting the course with a global perspective was intellectually the right thing to do—and, Tom, I am embarrassed I did not do it sooner—the students' responses were complicated. The course evaluations submitted anonymously at the end of the semester were largely favorable. I particularly cherished the several variations on the theme of "I never thought history would be interesting, *but* …," and many students clearly appreciated the wide range of the assignments; they were, as one put it, "a phenomenal mix of every conceivable voice. … [they] included just about every ethnicity, religious, gender etc. viewpoint. FABULOUS reading selections!"

Some felt, however, that the class still fell woefully short. "We live in a globalized world. The course shouldn't be so focused on the 'American history of Journalism,'" wrote another student about exactly the same "phenomenal mix" of voices. This student continued: "Obviously the readings didn't reflect diversity because the premise of the course doesn't allow for diversity." And even though the total time I devoted to non-US material throughout the seven weeks added up to much more than any single session, a number of students said they would rather isolate the international topics into a session of their own. That sort of approach, to be sure, would have made an unequivocal statement that "yes, we are including international journalism and *here it is*." It would also, however, have represented exactly the sort of intellectual dismemberment I was trying to avoid.

Clearly, the US-centric version of the course left out the students who came from everywhere else. But it is also evident that once we promise a course with a more "international" focus, a different issue comes into play for some students: that it leaves out *the place where I come from.* For people entering young adulthood, especially those who are doing so in an unfamiliar, even alien setting, it is scarcely surprising that studying "the making of public culture" feels less urgent an endeavor than finding

their own place in it—or that they measure the value of a course in global history by its capacity for validation through inclusiveness.

Nor am I in any way dismissing the importance of that sort of validation. Even when the course was predominantly American in its focus, I made a point of choosing readings that reflected the diversity of the US and was careful to integrate these works throughout the syllabus rather than corralling them in a single week under some dismissive rubric like "Other Voices." To introduce the reporting of the Civil War, for instance, I selected from a newspaper called the *Philadelphia Press* an article that, I emphasized to the students, was highly typical of its era in subject, style, tone, language, and reporting tactics. It was typical, that is, in all ways except one: It was written by a free black man named Thomas Morris Chester, the only known African American reporting for a mainstream newspaper at the time.[5]

After the class a young African American woman came up to me positively bubbling over with joy and excitement.

"I was stunned to see that reading," she said. "I had no idea an African American could be a reporter in those days. We never read anything like that in school, and I never knew there would be a place for me in a history course like this. *You changed my life!*"

What teacher does *not* want to hear a student tell her "you changed my life"? And now that I also discuss work by journalists from India and Colombia and Australia and Russia, maybe I will change the lives of Indians and Colombians and Australians and Russians too.

But questions remain. If the success of a course is measured by whether it mentions *me,* then what about the Brazilians and Egyptians and Ugandans, whose lives I just don't have time in my seven weeks to change? If I mention *her* country but not *his,* am I changing *his* life, too, but for the worse? If I manage to namecheck all 196 or so countries in the world, how could I possibly have time enough to say anything interesting about any of them, let alone coherence enough to constitute a meaningful narrative that satisfactorily explains why things happen? And does this sort of *anti*-synthetic approach have anything to contribute to an understanding of the making of public culture?

Navigating the dilemmas of identity in a diverse and fragmented public sphere is, of course, not a new challenge for people who do history for a living. But it is not a new challenge either for other professionals whose everyday work also involves constituting meaningful narratives that satisfactorily explain why things happen. As my students go out to interpret the world as journalists, I hope they will recall and acknowledge what a complicated task that can be.

Notes

[1] Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 10.

[2] For an entry point into the debate see the twelve essays in the recent series "Why Journalism History Matters" in *American Journalism,* the journal of the American Journalism Historians Association, beginning with John Nerone, "Why Journalism History Matters to Journalism Studies," *American Journalism* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 15–28 and extending through Andie Tucher, "Why Journalism History Matters: The Gaffe, the 'Stuff,' and the Historical Imagination," *American Journalism* 31, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 432–444.

[3] Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73, no. 1 (1986): 122.

[4] Anna Politkovskaya, "When a Journalist Becomes a Victim," *The Guardian*, May 2, 2001, originally published in Russian in the Moscow-based investigative paper *Novaya Gazeta*, February 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2001/may/02/4.

[5] I used his article "Fall of Richmond," datelined April 4, 1865, and reprinted in R. J. M. Blackett, ed., *Thomas Morris Chester, Black Civil War Correspondent: His Dispatches from the Virginia Front* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 288–294.

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